

# Student-Led Conferences in Inclusive Settings

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Student-led conferences offer many advantages for students with and without disabilities and their families. When student-led conferences are coupled with the use of portfolios, students assume more responsibility for their learning and see connections among and between their learning in and outside of school. This article describes the steps and results from one school district that has adopted the student-led conference approach for all students.

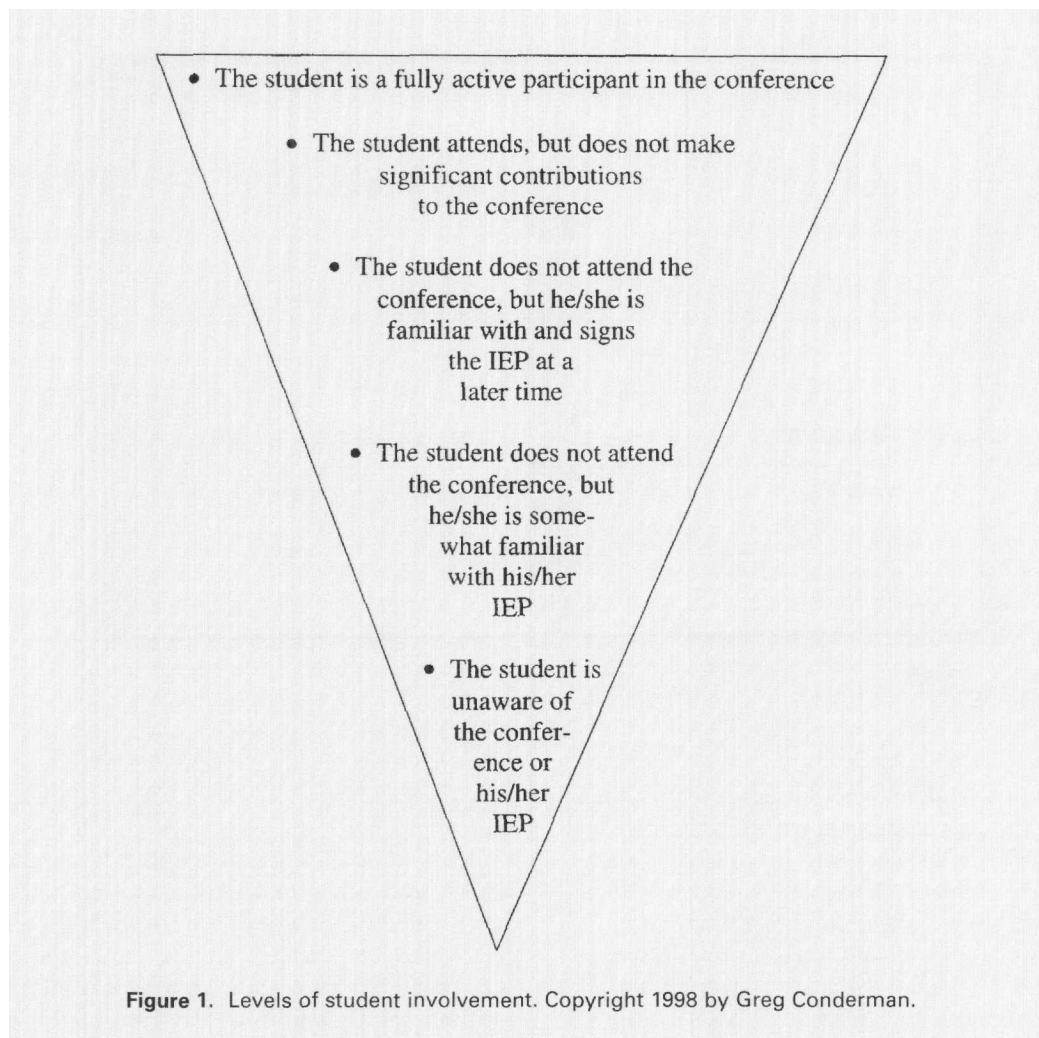
Joshua, a seventh-grade student with a learning disability, and his nondisabled peers in his general education social studies class are setting academic, social, and community and service learning goals; selecting entries for their portfolios; reflecting on their progress toward such goals; and rehearsing their scripts for their upcoming student-led conferences. Throughout the quarter, Joshua and his peers receive specific instruction on how to use and develop rubrics, share their progress with others, and set and revise new goals. As Joshua's peers prepare for their regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences, Joshua prepares for his annual Individualized Education Program (IEP) review. When Joshua shares his portfolio with his IEP team, members of his team ask him questions that cause him to reflect upon his goals, and they consider his portfolio entries as they collectively review his progress and develop new goals for the following year.

Joshua and many students like him are learning these new skills at Prairie Middle School in the College Community School District in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The student-led conference approach, now in its fifth year of implementation district-wide, brings together parents, general and special educators, students with and without

disabilities in Grades K through 12, and other IEP members in new and exciting ways. Student-led conferences also meet the requirements of the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as these conferences provide frequent reports to parents about student growth in the general education curriculum.

Involving students with disabilities in their regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences or their IEP conferences is not a new idea. Special educators have explored various levels of student involvement in IEP conferences for several years. Figure 1 shows the various levels of student involvement in conferences.

As shown in Figure 1, students may assume roles associated with various levels of involvement in their IEP conferences, depending upon factors such as their age and ability, and logistical issues such as time and scheduling. Students in the lowest level are unaware that they have an IEP, and students in the highest level are empowered through shared decision making and are considered vital members of the IEP team. IEP team members are encouraged to involve students in ways that increase their meaningful participation. When properly executed, student-led conferences reflect the highest level in this cascade.

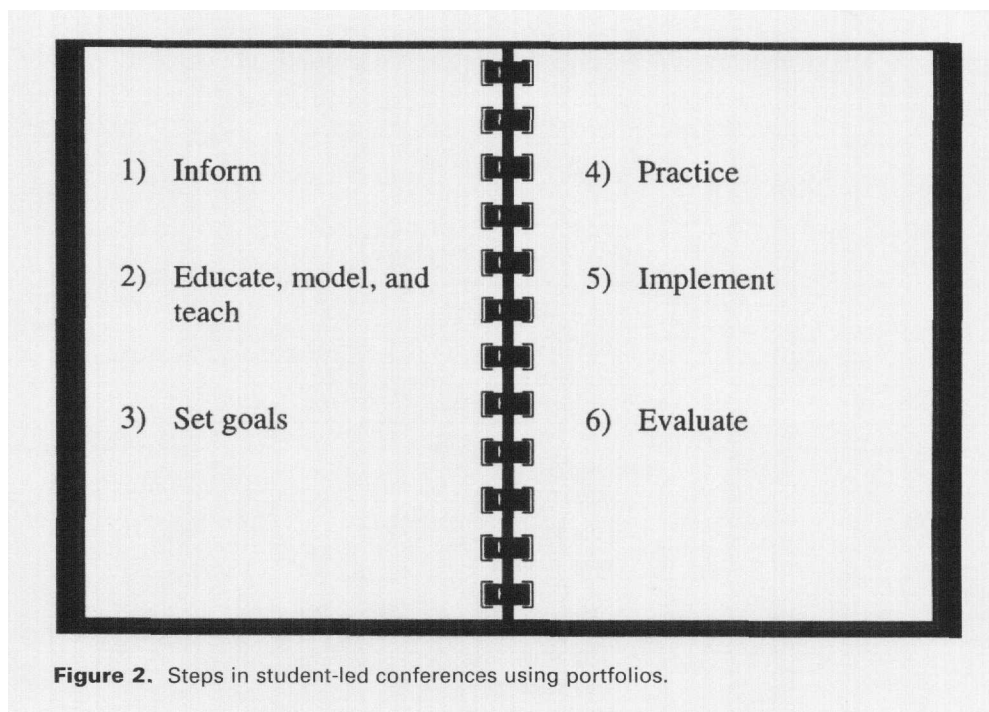


In addition to increasing meaningful student involvement, there are three major reasons why many school districts have adopted student-led conferences as an alternative to the traditional parent-teacher conference. First, traditional conferences frequently exclude the student, an otherwise critical link in the home-school communication network. As a result, some students view the traditional conference with distrust because they perceive it as an opportunity for teachers to “talk behind their backs” (Hackmann, 1996). Similarly, what parents hear at home from their child is sometimes quite different than what they hear from school personnel. This places parents in the difficult position of not knowing whom to believe (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996). Student-led conferences address these issues by fostering open communication among all three parties.

Second, the traditional conference format focuses primarily on the teacher’s goals for the student. These goals may or may not have meaning for the parent or student. Student-led conferences, especially when coupled with the use of portfolios, promote student goal-setting, student reflection, and student responsibility for meeting established goals. Student involvement is critical for students of all ages and grades, but it is par-

ticularly compatible with the middle school philosophy, mission, organizational structure, and instructional models (Aseltine, 1993).

Finally, traditional means of communicating with parents of children with disabilities—often at IEP conferences—have usually focused on the child’s performance on norm-referenced assessments, which may not reflect the school’s curriculum or be easily translated into a meaningful IEP. Further, IEP conferences emphasize the child’s deficits rather than strengths. Most student-led conferences, on the other hand, emphasize authentic portfolio entries, which directly parallel the school’s curriculum. Further, because portfolios may include a variety of entries, parents learn about the child’s interests, the next steps in teaching, future learning activities that should occur, and what strategies the student has used to learn and problem solve (Wesson & King, 1996). Finally, portfolios promote communication between the general and special educator, demystify assessment language, and focus on the process of instruction (Wesson & King, 1996). Therefore, student-led conferences that include a portfolio component provide parents with more information about their child’s learning and progress than do traditional report cards (Paulson & Paulson, 1994).



Faculty at Prairie Middle School use six steps in their student-led conference approach: (a) inform; (b) educate, model, and teach; (c) set goals; (d) practice; (e) implement; and (f) evaluate. These steps, which will be briefly discussed, are portrayed in Figure 2.

**1. Inform.** First, parents and students are informed of the change in district practice regarding traditional parent-teacher conferences. Informing parents early in the school year establishes an expectation that parental participation is both valued and necessary. At College Community, parents receive an informative letter that explains the new process, provides a rationale, highlights new roles and responsibilities, and encourages parents to complete an enclosed questionnaire about their child's strengths, weaknesses, interests, hobbies, study habits, hopes, dreams, and character traits. This returned and completed questionnaire is frequently updated and considered when setting goals and becomes a cornerstone in the student's portfolio.

According to Anthony, Johnson, Mickelson, and Preece (1991), the details in this first step are critical. These authors suggested that parents be informed specifically that the goals of student-led conferences are to help students (a) accept more responsibility for their work; (b) learn to organize, present, and communicate; (c) learn to self-evaluate; and (d) become more accountable. Parents should also be informed that this is an opportunity for them to show a positive interest in their child's work, that a teacher will be in the room and available during the conference, and that parents can still meet privately with the teacher if they wish to convene in the more traditional sense.

**2. Educate, model, and teach.** This step is an elaboration of the Inform Step. As parents learn more about student-led conferences through PTA meetings, newsletters, and other means of communication, students learn about their new roles from their general and special education teachers. In this step, teachers provide specific instruction about portfolios and the various components involved in the student-led conference. Teachers model how to set goals, select entries for various goals, write reflection pieces, and receive and provide feedback (Lockledge, 1997). Because these tasks may be new to students, teachers must provide ample opportunities for modeling, guided practice, and independent practice for all students.

Collinson (1995) noted that teachers should acquaint students with rubrics during this step. She recommended that teachers begin by showing students a rubric that they developed, model aloud how they decided upon the components and the criteria, then show how various products meet or fail to meet the criteria. Finally, after students have had ample practice evaluating their own work, teachers can elicit student help in developing additional rubrics for other portfolio pieces.

**3. Set goals.** After students have been introduced to the concept of student-led conferences and portfolios, they begin setting academic, social, behavioral, service learning, community involvement, and recreational goals. Hackmann (1996) suggested that students be reminded to collect artifacts related to their goals and store them in their portfolios so they will be readily available to share during their conferences.

At Prairie Middle School, student portfolios typically include a quarter or semester summary highlighting areas of study, improvement, and strength; a personal reflection on selected courses; an entry on friendships and peer groups; information about extracurricular activities and goals; a reflective piece on what they have learned during the grading period; test scores; grades; and information about transitioning into the next grade or school.

**4. Practice.** Working from an organizer sheet or a script outline, students now role play their student-led conference. Peers and/or teachers provide specific feedback using a rubric, rating scale, or class-developed worksheet. Countryman and Schroeder (1996) included three rehearsals with classmates serving as stand-in parents. During this practice step, students refine their communication and organization skills and receive last-minute reminders.

**5. Implement.** Students now reflect on the feedback they received during the practice step, and parents are invited to the 30-minute conference. During the conference, students may use a checklist or script, and the teacher provides additional prompts or supports as needed.

**6. Evaluate.** Finally, the evaluation step involves gathering feedback from students, teachers, and parents and modifying the process. At Prairie Middle School, student-led conferences are evaluated in several ways. First, students complete a self-evaluation questionnaire that helps them reflect on their level of preparation, their delivery, and their ability to include the necessary conference components, such as greeting and introducing conference members. Second, students and parents complete open-ended questionnaires that solicit feedback about both the general process and the specifics of the process. Finally, students, teachers, and parents discuss student-led conferences during PTA meetings, forums, and class meetings.

The feedback regarding student-led conferences at Prairie Middle School has been overwhelmingly positive. More than 90% of parents indicated that they were pleased or very pleased with the new process and that they believed student-led conferences focused on the whole child, fostered student accountability, and promoted positive discussions regarding the child's progress. Further, parental attendance at conferences rose from 35% prior to implementation of student-led conferences to more than 93% during the last few years. These findings are consistent with existing middle school student-led conference research (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1995; Shannon, 1997).

Despite these positive outcomes, some parents indicated a desire to meet privately with the teacher to discuss sensitive issues or to learn of the child's relative academic standing in the class. These needs must be re-

spected, and student-led conferences should not be viewed as a way of abolishing the parent-teacher meeting. Several districts, for example, maintain the traditional conference format during alternate grading sessions. Teachers need to emphasize their desire to meet the needs of parents. Similarly, for students with disabilities, student-led conferences can easily be combined with the annual review conference. Doing so, however, does not absolve the IEP team from their responsibilities.

In closing, student-led conferences, especially when combined with the use of portfolios, offer many advantages for students with and without disabilities and their families. First, because portfolios emphasize authentic assessments based on student-generated goals, entries directly relate to the curriculum and to the student. Entries show growth over time on tasks from the general education curriculum in inclusive classrooms as well as on IEP goals and objectives. Similarly, the mode of communication is more "student and family friendly" as students lead the conference with support from the general or special educator. Discussions focus on goals, progress, and products rather than deficits, standard scores, and grade equivalents. Confusing terminology is dramatically reduced, an otherwise common concern voiced by parents at IEP meetings (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Finally, student-led conferences bring together parents, educators, and students in new, exciting, and collaborative ways. Research (Conderman, Hatcher, & Ikan, 1998; Hackmann, 1996) indicates that parents are more involved in their children's education as evidenced from their attendance at conferences, that students like Joshua are assuming more responsibility for their learning, and that teachers working with students with and without disabilities in inclusive settings are seeing students make connections in their learning, improve their communication skills, and learn from one another.

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